Review of JA Draper ed., Orality, Literacy and Colonialism in Southern Africa

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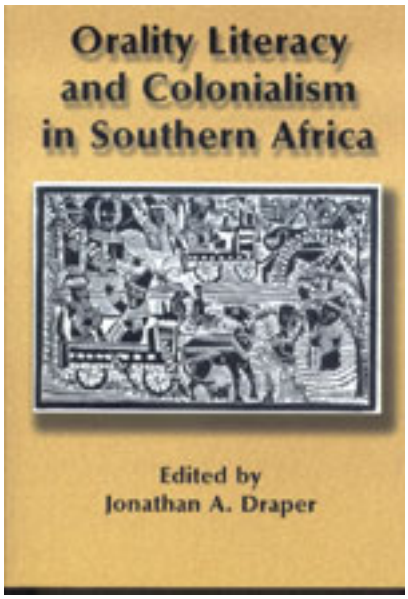

Draper, Jonathan A., ed.

Orality, Literacy and Colonialism in Southern Africa

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The heritage of colonialism still lingers on within postapartheid South Africa—of which the Bible and Western text-based literacy is an inherent part. This publication is based upon a series of lectures presented during a colloquium on orality, literacy, and colonialism held in Pietermaritzburg (South Africa) in August 2001. Scholars from divergent fields participated, resulting in a publication with a strong interdisciplinary character, which is certainly to be merited. The interdisciplinary collaboration brings together different and diverse perspectives in an attempt to "contribute to the effort to recover aspects of the rich oral tradition of Southern Africa past and present. The chapters seek to delineate some of the contours of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems which sustained resistance to colonialism and continue to provide resources for the struggles of post-apartheid society in Southern Africa" (cover).

In this sense the interest of the book is twofold. The first part (five essays) focuses on the question of orality, literacy and colonialism in a historical perspective—"in which the relationship between colonial domination and the text, especially the Bible, is contrasted with the survival of indigenous culture in a continuing oral tradition that emerges in ever new forms" (3). The second part (six essays) deals with dimensions of orality and resistance in modern South Africa—addressing the question of "how indigenous oral traditions are preserved and remembered in the face of the hegemony of a literacy that is

sponsored by and promotes the colonial culture" (3), as well as the mechanisms available for and utilized in the successful intergenerational transfer of material. The two main parts are framed by introductory (J. A. Draper) and concluding (T. Ranger) essays, providing focus and critical reflection.

In the opening essay Jonathan Draper ("Script, Subjugation, and Subversion: An Introduction") states that the particular focus of the discussion in this book "lies in a perception that literacy is not innocent. It is a form of control, not only of information but also of people. The emergence of literacy and that of empire are interconnected" (1). The conflict that arises from the interaction or "conversation" between an oral and literary society, as well as the destabilizing effect of this juxtaposition of two cultures, forms a central part of the discussion—as well as the resilience of an oral culture (defending its "symbolic universe") in the face of subjugation. The question of resilience and resistance is closely connected, which brings into discussion the different ways in which the subjugated people "spoke back" to their colonial rulers and an intruding culture. In this regard the concept of "bricolage" or the process of bricolage—that is, that "the cultural symbols and doctrines ostensibly drawn from missionaries and the Christian faith in Africa could change their shape and reference, even being turned back against their own proponents" (5)—has an important place within the publication.

Within the context of the *first part* of the publication Jeff Opland *(*"Fighting with the Pen: The Appropriation of the Press by Early Xhosa Writers") addresses the issue of the Xhosa appropriation of European print technology in the struggle for political and social equality (40) and points out how the employment of the means provided by an intruding text-based literary culture, in part, sustained the struggle and resistance of a subjugated oral culture and tradition. For example, writing and publishing in Xhosa was coincided by the appeal to the new Xhosa elite to lay down arms and to "fight with the pen." Gerald West *(*"From the Bible as Bola to Biblical Interpretation as Marabi: Tlhaping Transactions with the Bible") tries to track the traces of the emergence of an indigenous hermeneutic (42), arguing for the utilization of its potential. In doing so he distinguishes between an indigenous hermeneutic "powered by repetition, circularity, and rhythm" and "a linear, text-bound commentary" typical of Western hermeneutics. To demonstrate the first he employs the term *marabi* as an interpretative form of music and as metaphor for biblical interpretation, since it represents a communal attempt "to make some common sense or theme 'out of what is playing.' " He uses the term *bola* to describe the nature or function of the Bible as an object of power within colonial South Africa and investigates the response of the Tlhaping people of southern Africa toward the Bible and its mediators as an instance of indigenous hermeneutics, creating "a middle ground between displaced traditional order and a modern world whose vitality was both elusive and estranging" (52).

In his second essay Jonathan Draper *(*"The Closed Text and the Heavenly Telephone: The Role of the *Bricoleur* in Oral Mediation of Sacred Text in the Case of George Khambule and the Gospel of John") investigates the ambivalent role of a sacred text in a situation of colonial domination (58) and points to the ambiguous process of identifying new ways forward in times of cultural collapse and imperial hegemony—maintaining ones own religiocultural heritage while exploring the potential of insights brought by the invading culture (59). He tries to indicate how this process of "bricolage" contributes to the mediation of the text in new oral forms, not under control of the "empire (65), and regards the author of the book of John and the Zulu prophet Khambula as examples of "bricoleurs," that is, availing themselves of symbols of power and exploring counterstrategies of appropriation.

Carol Muller ("Making the Book, Performing the Words of *Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha*") addresses the complex and contested place of "the idea of the book" (which has not been adequately deconstructed by literary critics) and the culture of writing in colonial South Africa. Her basic point of departure is that "Regardless of where an individual or group was located in the emergent political economy, writing unequivocally encompassed bureaucratic power and ensure European cultural domination over local peoples in the region" (92). She pays particular attention to Isaiah Shembe (founder of the Church of the Nazarites) and discusses several aspects concerning the written material flowing from his pen within the context of the Nazarite church (93). The Nazarite perspective provides, for Muller, "a powerful contrast with the secular practices of reading and hearing" (109). In this sense the Zulu word *izwi,* with its double meaning of "voice and word," is instructive "for understanding how a largely nonliterate community incorporated the book, a written vernacular, and literacy itself into existing epistemology" (110).

The essay by Deborah James and Geoffrey Maphahla Nkadimeng ("The Land and the Word: Missions, African Christians, and the Claiming of Land in South Africa") focuses on the significance of biblical oratory and Christian practice in relation to land, as both securing access to and reclaiming it. They try to indicate how the Bible serves as a rich source of imagery for those who have gone through a process of unsettling experiences, as well as its significance in helping people to deal with these experiences and the coinciding struggle with the question of self identity. The community at Doornkop is taken as an example, and they explore the significance of the Bible in the memories and aspirations of this group of people. They try to demonstrate how a community that experienced its own existence as inseparably linked to its land asserted that existence in terms of biblical narrative (113) and how it is that biblical discourse endorses a sense of entitlement (129) in which religion and its secular dimensions are fused (131).

The *second part* of the publication commences with the essay by Liz Gunner ("Frozen Assets? Orality and the Public Space in KZN: Izibongo and Isicathamiya") in which she investigates the relevance and potential of the praise poems of royalty, the *izibongo* of the Zulu kings for the present time. That is, what is the capacity of this genre of popular culture "to negotiate the present painful dilemmas about belonging at different levels?" She regards (the Zulu) poetry and poets as part of a different polyphony of the public space in the production of culture but argues that, as kinds of valuable frozen assets, it has lost the capacity to engage meaningfully with any kind of active "knowledgeable community" (135). Duncan Brown (" 'Where Shall I Wonder under the Thunder Who's the Black Boys Making the Noise Step a Little Closer to the Mic': Prophets of da City and Urban [South African] Identity") investigates expressions of identity and belonging in South African rap music, with the music of the rap group Prophets of da City serving as an example. His concern is with "the way in which identity is articulated, claimed, and performed through different aspects of this musical phenomenon" (145). He points to and questions the potential of this (ambiguous) musical genre as a new form of orality within the postcolonial South African context.

Maarman Sam Tshehla ("Translation and the Vernacular Bible in the Debate between My 'Traditional' and Academic Worldviews") provides a description of his own experiences in the hands of the two worlds he inhabits and engages with—as part of the Basotho tribe and as part of the academic world—in an attempt to create a coherent world for himself (171). These two worlds, of course, represent two different cultures, the one oral and the other literary, bringing about an inevitable tension that is simultaneously potential and problematic. Ashlee Lenta ("Listening Again: Finding Ways to Host the TRC's Oral, Auto/Biographical Space") investigates the contested border between narrative re-presentation and narrative appropriation (203). His concern is with "stories told at Human Rights Violation hearings in which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission appeared to open up new conditions of possibility for the oral auto/biographical act in South Africa" (191) and questions the extent to which the TRC was receptive to various forms of narrative self-telling.

Philippe Denis ("Oral History in a Wounded Country") shares some reflections on the practice of oral history in postapartheid South Africa (205). He points to the looseness of the concept oral history and argues that "oral history is more than an improved method of documenting the people's past. It is a conversation, … an exchange of information, but also … a relationship" (209). As such, oral history has the potential to affirm and consolidate identities that have been repressed in the past (209). Mogomme Alpheus Masoga ("Becoming *Ngaka:* Coming to Terms with Oral Narrative Discourses") stresses the significance of divination to the African life and wants to bring this neglected and previously marginalized discourse into the center of the debate and scholarship. He

regards existing publications on the topic as reductionist and in his own discussion draws from the insights of narrative theory. In essence he presents an account of his own life history as informed by divination and divination oracles, which, for African people, is a daily occurrence and central to their lives, philosophies, and cultures (217).

The concluding essay by Terence Ranger ("Commentary") offers his critical reflection as a Southern Africanist rather than a South Africanist—with an interest in the colonial and postcolonial Zimbabwean context. He challenges the notion of an all-encompassing indigenous worldview that collapses with the emergence of literacy, as argued in some of the essays presented in the book. In this regard he is more in agreement with the argument of Liz Gunner, who stresses the polyphonic production of culture as well as the multiple levels of involvement in the making of culture, as well as the flexibility of traditional cultural forms to engage dynamically with modernity. Ranger challenges the strict binary oppositions that most of the authors in this publication employ in an attempt to emphasize "the complexity, variety, and dynamism of African societies" (247).

This well edited publication unveils the seemingly innocent face of Western text-based literacy while promulgating the vibrancy of oral tradition in Africa and as such is certainly of significance within the diverse and polyphone Southern African context. It can be pointed out that the authors employ a rather familiar (some might say too familiar) postcolonial rhetoric and draw, as Ranger rightly points out, (too) heavily on specific binary oppositions ("indigenous" versus "Western" hermeneutics; "orality" versus "literacy"; African culture versus colonial industry) and at times overstress the uniqueness of the South African situation. But this should not deter interested parties—including biblical scholars—since the publication is both challenging and enlightening. It makes a valuable contribution in creating a consciousness for the importance and potential of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in contexts of subjugation and liberation—which extends the relevance of the publication beyond the borders of the Southern African context.

Editor: For reviews of the Society of Biblical Literature edition of this volume, see http://bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=4155&CodePage=4193,4155,2752,598.